

Chinese Cycles of Unity vs Disunity (Toynbee context cheat-sheet)

Qin Dynasty (221–206
BCE)

Unity

First imperial unification;
centralized bureaucracy;
end of the Warring
States.

Han Dynasty (206 BCE–
220 CE)

Unity (mostly)
Consolidation of imperial
system; major
administrative and
cultural shaping.

Post-Han Era / Three
Kingdoms + Northern &

Southern Dynasties (220–589)

Disunity

Multiple rival states, shifting borders, ethnic complexity; long fragmentation.

Sui Dynasty (581–618) +
Tang Dynasty (618–907)

Unity

Reunification after
centuries of division;
Tang becomes cultural
powerhouse.

Post-Tang Era / Five
Dynasties and Ten
Kingdoms (907–960)

Disunity

Regional kingdoms,

short-lived dynasties,
fragmented power.

Song Dynasty (960–1279)

Partial unity

Strong culture and
economy, but militarily
pressured and
territorially incomplete.

Yuan Dynasty (1271–

1368, Mongol rule)

Unity

Mongols control all of China; large multi-ethnic empire.

Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)

Unity

Return of Han rule;

strong state, big
maritime period (early
Ming), later isolationist
turn.

Qing Dynasty (1644–
1911, Manchu rule)

Unity

Last imperial dynasty;
large territory, multi-
ethnic empire; collapse in

early 20th c.

Pattern you probably
want to notice

Unity → fragmentation
→ unity →
fragmentation → unity
repeated across roughly

2000+ years.

That's exactly what
Toynbee is compressing
into those super fast
sentences. He's not
listing random dynasties
– he's showing that
Chinese history doesn't
“rise once and fall once”
like Rome, but alternates
structurally between

phases of order and disorder.

It's basically the dynastic cycle seen from a macro-civilizational angle.